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SUBJECT: THE IMPACT OF A PRE-ELECTION MD ANNOUNCEMENT

REF: PRAGUE 432

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mary Thompson-Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (S) SUMMARY: A U.S. announcement on the results of the missile defense policy review prior to October 9-10 will affect the results of the Czech elections by favoring the Social Democratic Party (CSSD) and harming the Civic Democratic Party (ODS). It will open the door to a CSSD-KSCM coalition, a never-before-crossed red line. Such a coalition would give short shrift to U.S. or NATO security issues. It is highly likely to weaken longer-term support across the political spectrum on security issues of importance to the USG. Our principal foreign policy objective in the Czech Republic (CR) is to strengthen support for a broad and active strategic security partnership with the U.S., especially continued deployments in Afghanistan. A pre-election announcement, by re-introducing the polarizing MD debate into the campaign, will have the opposite effect, because its impact will not be limited to the narrow issue of the radar facility in the Czech Republic. This will be felt over time in weakened support for foreign deployments and weakened Czech confidence in the U.S. as a reliable ally - not only among those pro-MD voices who will feel undermined or betrayed, but also among the Czech majority who will perceive negative historical patterns repeating themselves.

MD and Public Opinion

¶12. (S) What was unique about the MD debate - and uniquely detrimental to USG objectives - was how it became so polarizing and so partisan, and the potential it showed to bleed onto other bilateral issues. MD has never been popular among Czechs; polls consistently show opposition of 65-68 percent, support around 27-30 percent. This is only half the story. Polls also show that MD is a very low priority issue, ranked next to last just ahead of "foreign affairs" in general and far behind the usual pocketbook issues. It is also critical to distinguish that the universe of MD supporters is much smaller than the number of advocates in favor of security engagement. For example, Czech support for NATO is in the mid-70s. Even public support for Afghanistan deployments, while slipping as the conflict drags on, is still roughly break-even. If MD is high profile, it threatens to redefine other security issues, such as Afghanistan deployments, along left-right lines. Hence the Embassy's strategy of refocusing the public debate toward the broader strategic context and partnership, decoupled from one narrow (and divisive) facet which we have (mostly) successfully minimized for ten months now. A pre-election announcement will re-inject this divisive element smack into the middle of the campaign.

Election Impact

13. (S) No single party will garner enough seats to form a government alone, and thus once again Czechs will be governed by a coalition that will likely have a tenuous majority. Current polls show ODS with a 32-29 percent lead over CSSD. These numbers will certainly change during the campaign. What is certain is that these two parties will be the largest parliamentary blocs. The unreformed Communist Party (KSCM), now at 14 percent in the polls, will be the third largest group. A pre-election announcement will remind voters of a controversial issue normally of relative unimportance to them and will mean a swing of several points away from ODS and toward anti-radar parties (CSSD and KSCM). These parties are also either lukewarm or opposed to Afghanistan deployments. The stronger these elements are in a future coalition government means, without question, a much more difficult scenario for getting continued or increased cooperation on security issues. The post-election effects are much broader than this, however.

Effects on Perceptions of the U.S. and the Bilateral Relationship

14. (S) Bluntly put, we need Czech voices speaking out in favor of an active security partnership, especially Afghanistan engagement. A pre-election announcement will quiet those voices of support.

15. (S) Support on security issues will likely decrease along

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the political spectrum. There are no votes to be won in supporting foreign deployments, especially to war zones. Those Czech political leaders who support deployments do so despite the political cost. Our interest is in reducing that cost. That usually means by working to mainstream security issues, make them bi- (more accurately here, multi-) partisan, and avoid stirring up public firestorms. There are some within CSSD willing to work with us in this context, especially as long as the political cost is low. ODS historically has been more outspoken despite political risks.

16. (S) MD's public effect works only in one direction, favoring those most opposed to strong security ties with the U.S. Were the U.S. to announce a pullback on MD in the CR, this will NOT repeat NOT translate into gratitude or a positive reaction among radar opponents. The Communists, of course, are opposed to all security cooperation with us, including NATO. But even the CSSD will not be more favorably disposed should we pull back. On the contrary, those sectors represented by CSSD leader Jiri Paroubek that are most ambivalent about the security partnership will feel vindicated and emboldened. Their support for Afghanistan deployments is at best half-hearted; it will wane, especially if public support declines. Their interest in re-positioning the CR more closely toward Russia will rise - and they DO regard this as being zero-sum, at the expense of closer relations with the U.S. Those within CSSD who are supportive of strong security engagement will be far more reluctant to speak out. Those who will feel most vindicated within the CSSD are not those who (with the exception of MD) favor a strong partnership with the U.S., but rather those who favor a more distanced relationship across the board.

17. (S) Most ODS leaders believe they went out on a limb for the U.S. - not just on MD, but also on Iraq, Afghanistan, Georgia, Kosovo, Iran etc. Fairly or not, they will interpret an announcement during this timeframe, especially anything less than full support for radar in the CR, as the USG sawing that branch off behind them. This is the thinking that informed much of the Havel-Walesa letter of July 16. They are far less likely to be forward-leaning on future security issues if they believe they have been burned

politically on MD. That will include the next time Afghanistan deployments are debated in the Czech parliament.

¶18. (S) More broadly, a pre-election announcement will have lasting impacts on Czech public perceptions of the U.S. regardless of political views. Most Czechs will say that history has taught them to mistrust great powers and be skeptical, perhaps cynical, toward political leaders. Few will distinguish this as a policy difference between the previous and current administrations. Many will suspect that the U.S., perhaps out of naivete, has acquiesced to Russia. Every Czech fear of the "about us without us" kind - that the great powers are too willing to cut deals at smaller countries' expense, that they were sacrificed on the altar of expedience in Munich and Yalta - will resurface. Few Czechs will regard the U.S. as exempt from that great power tendency. Czech cynicism toward political rhetoric means that any subsequent public diplomacy campaign will be regarded as empty spinning.

Conclusion

¶19. (S) There is no easy path to turning the detritus of the MD debate over the past two years into a silk purse. But there is no reason why we should hinder efforts to strengthen our broader security partnership - regardless of the substance of the MD review decision - by reviving in mid-campaign a damaging controversy that weakens pro-U.S. voices of all political parties and weakens the prospects for building support on the critical issue of Afghanistan deployments. Whether or not such weakened Czech resolve will turn into a push to withdraw from Afghanistan, and whether or not a Czech withdrawal would affect other Central and Eastern European countries' deployment decisions, this cannot help advance U.S. foreign policy interests here.

Thompson-Jones